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ABSTRACT

On-line writing can disrupt conventions; it can challenge the way writers write in the classroom; however, after logging off, the writer re-enters the academy and its more traditional ways of inscribing student subjectivities. The question is asked if educators, when arguing for the freedom of electronic classrooms, are taking into consideration the material conditions in which students write outside of the classroom? On-line conversations may create the sense that the writer works and speaks in a safe, unconstrained and ideologically empty space--in a space where he or she is not physically identified and categorized. Computer users might ask why they find themselves searching for a face and a body given that pseudonyms are framed as the most "freeing" of ways to challenge limiting and restrictive identities. Maybe they have to satisfy surprisingly essentialist needs for a visible connection between writing and writer. This act of "naming" that computer users perform either unconsciously or consciously could be read as perpetuating society's hegemonic namings. By calling some anonymous writer "female" or "woman" after reading her entries, perhaps computer users are merely re-subscribing to the strategies of the dominant essentialist voice--re-inscribing a gendered self to the self that they had been so euphoric about deconstructing or exploding on screen in writing. It is concluded that what on-line writing does is mystify and obscure the "material" imprints of institutional patriarchy, imprints that students will have to deal with when writing outside the classroom. (TB)

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Gender In-Difference: Rethinking Ideologies On-line.

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Katherine Grubbs
Paper to be given at CCCC

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In the broadest sense, in this paper, I want to focus on the question of "how do we read the writer?" in computerized classrooms. Many theorists make the claim that computerized classrooms create a "free" space in which students can ask and respond to questions with no fear of repercussions. They can experiment with different writing styles, and even, as Lester Faigley claims in Fragments of Rationality "student writers try on and exchange identities in electronic discussions."(191) Marilyn M. Cooper and Cynthia L. Selfe argue in their article, "Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority, Resistance, and Internally Persuasive Discourse" that we need to change the forums for discourse in the classroom as a way to encourage student resistance through language. Computer classrooms can do this and as part of this project, students take on "alternate subjectivities" that let them incorporate more "authoritative roles" (851). Mary J. Flores in her essay, "Computer Conferencing: Composing a Feminist Community of Writers" also argues that computer networking in a classroom provides "a more egalitarian mode of dialogue. Each student has equal access to the conference." (112)

On line writing can disrupt conventions, can challenge the way we write in the classroom, but after logging off, the writer re-enters the academy and its more traditional ways of inscribing student subjectivities. By arguing for the freedom of electronic classrooms, are we taking into consideration the material conditions in which students write outside of the classroom? On line conversations may create the sense that the writer works and speaks in a safe, unconstrained and ideology-empty space - in a place where they are not physically identified and categorized. The self is dis-embodied. Part of the rhetoric about computers in composition classrooms celebrates this detachment from ideological constraints - especially those of class, gender, race, sexuality. Because the physical subjectivity of a writer becomes invisible and hidden, some people argue that our students are freed from ideological "naming" by the academy. Instead, the only way that fellow writers identify other writers on-line is by and through the writing product. The "self" of the writer becomes experienced through the language

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of the writing they send out. The writing actually writes the writer. Differences seem to disappear. So is this electronic thinking/writing untouched by ideology and by difference? Are one's written thoughts exempt from social "naming"? I argue that traditional ideologies and social framework do not merely vanish. Then we must ask what sort of power does this give us?

This is especially interesting when thought about in terms of gender differences. Cynthia Selfe in "Technology in the English Classroom: Computers through the Lens of Feminist Theory" discusses using pseudonyms in electronic classrooms. "Because I employed a pseudonym much of the time, my contributions to the conversation were frequently unmarked by my role as teacher and were treated like those of any other participant. The lack of face-to-face cues in the conference meant that gender, age and social status also disappeared except as individuals chose to reveal themselves...What counted...is the quality of a student's thinking." (127) Yet do gendered differences really disappear? Does the evidence of our assumptions about gender and difference that surface in writing on the computer screen in its fragmented way actually deconstruct these differences in a liberating way? Might it not be easier to address these differences when working face-to-face than it is on-line? I argue that we continue to "read" differences into computer conversations even if they are not visibly "there", trying to re-establish the physical body behind the words.

And from where, then, comes our need to always "name" the un-named writers in networked conversations that offer the use of pseudonyms? As described in his book, Lester Faigley has had one networked class (1988) that continued to meet every fourth day outside of the computer classroom " to keep in mind the faces that went with the names."(168-69) He also describes how he and his students were able to "identify" a certain Hispanic man in the class because of "this student's characteristic humor in networked discussions."(183) Why is there this need to identify him? - to identify him through his language? In this instance, are oppressive gestures and frameworks of discourse really disrupted? Faigley elsewhere states that he is going to "read" the networked conversation in his 1989 class example looking at issues of difference,

yet he takes the time to name and identify the three students that have "different" (i.e. non-white) identities. He does not feel the need to "name" the white students in this way. (186)

Given that pseudonyms are framed as the most "freeing" of ways to challenge limiting and restrictive identities why do we find ourselves searching for a face and body? - perhaps to satisfy surprisingly essentialist needs for a visible connection between writing and writer? This act of "naming" which we perform either unconsciously or consciously could be read as perpetuating society's hegemonic namings. By "calling" some anonymous writer "female" or "woman" after reading her entries, aren't we merely re-subscribing to the strategies of the dominant essentialist voice - re-inscribing a gendered self to the self which we had been so euphoric about deconstructing or exploding on screen in our writing?

I argue that on-line writing mystifies and obscures the "material" imprints of institutional patriarchy. I think this is why we always search for the body behind networked messages - perhaps this material essence is ultimately necessary for the practice of liberatory pedagogy in computer mediated conversations. And I also wonder why at this particular moment in postmodernity does this technology gain its reified position in the classroom? Do the conversations between students on-line really constitute a "level playing field"? As Nancy Hartsock says, "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (Nicholson 163) Is it responsible to talk about this new kind of writing as eradicating differences when outside the classroom and off the computer networks, students will continue to face gendered assumptions and expectations?

We must not think of our classrooms as unconnected to the world outside. Students deal with certain material realities (that seem to disappear on-line) the minute they walk out the door. It is certainly useful to begin by thinking about how identities are re-configured through computer conversations, but we must also recognize that this cannot be the end of the conversation. If we acknowledge that writing (even in the fragmented, performative form that emerges during on-line conversations) may "play" with gendered ideologies, without actually

changing them, I think we will begin our conversation about gendered differences in the academy from a more responsible position. It may not be possible for the student to practice the "unconventional" writing and conversations that the student participates in class, outside of class without incurring repercussions. As Lester Faigley says later in his book, "The experience of teaching this [networked] class convinced me that even if patriarchal social structures do not vanish when students use InterChange (note that several of the women chose male pseudonyms), some of the socially defined limits assigned to gender are mitigated." (181)

— HANDOUT -

Session J.28
Session Title: Issues of Difference in Hypertext and Networked Discussion

Presenter: Katherine K. Grubbs from the University of California, San Diego

Title of Presentation: ***Gender In-Difference: Rethinking Ideologies On-line***

In the past few years, teachers and students have begun to expand the definition of a writing classroom by incorporating computer networks with more traditional pedagogical strategies. In tantalizing rhetoric, this new classroom has been heralded as a potent critique of static, hierarchically-inscribed teacher/student dynamics and as a way to destabilize the powerful discourses of the academy. "Communication by computer thus enhances the sense of personal freedom and individualism by reducing the existential engagement of the self in its communications." (Feenberg, "The Written World" 23) The apparent writer anonymity that comes hand-in-hand with computer conferencing seems to create a classroom atmosphere that "frees" up the student to write whatever she wants, to ask questions with no fear of material consequences. The self becomes strangely dis-embodied and appears to be detached from ideological constraints, especially those of gender, race, class and sexuality. Differences appear to disappear.

However, this is the point that I want to argue in this presentation. For me, a writer and teacher concerned with thinking about feminist critical pedagogies, a closer examination of this seeming state of "freedom" becomes crucial to understanding the work of computer conferences. Although on-line writing seems to handily eradicate the constraints of socially constructed differences among students and between students and teachers, I want to put forth the claim that in fact gendered ideologies do not vanish magically when we begin computer conversations. They remain embedded in our computerized writing and reading, in the language we use and the way that we use it, and in the relationships constructed through words and in our minds with our co-writers on-line. As teachers, we must now work to open up these new computer dialogues to expose to further scrutiny the impact of this masking on our student writers. We must begin to ask critical questions about the implication of gender with and in the power dynamics of a technology-based writing classroom and in the writing that happens there. Following are some questions with which I propose we begin our conversation of these topics:

1. Given that difference seems to be eradicated by the "freeing" of language from social constraints in computer conversations, are students empowered by this anonymity (the masking of gender, race, class differences) or do they and their writing become more effaced, marginalized and even commodified by a "groundless" cyberculture?

2. Does the student self become detached from ideological constraints during computerized conversations? And, depending on how we respond to this question, does this "new" writing uncover, or further mystify, the gendered positioning of students and writing in school?

3. And in thinking about eventual student "empowerment" in the academy: Does the increase in computer conferencing in the computerized classroom and in writing center tutorials actually subvert the material conventions of academic writing - or is it more of the same?

"Computer networks can make it possible for individual writers and readers who have been prevented form entering our academic conversations in the past to become central contributors. ...electronic circles that support alternative, non-traditional dialogue and dialectic, communities that value revision and reinterpretation of traditional educational structures."(Selfe, "Technology in the English Classroom" 123)

"By allowing everyone to 'talk' at once, the use of networked computers for teaching writing represent for some teachers the realization of the 'student-centered' classroom. The utopian dream of an equitable sharing of classroom authority, at least during the duration of a class discussion, has been achieved."(Faigley, Fragments of Rationality 167)

"...even if patriarchal social structures do not vanish when students use InterChange... some of the socially defined limits assigned to gender are mitigated. ...students said it provided a degree of anonymity. ...communication is more equitable and less inhibited when such factors as appearance, paralinguistic behavior, and the gaze of others are removed in written electronic conferences."(Faigley, Fragments of Rationality 181-182)

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